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The Academic Experience.

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This report shows the results of a questionnaire on academic experiences, administered to students at four different colleges. Included in the term "academic experiences" are such factors as mental activities in class and in studying for class, the role of the teacher, motivation for studying, feelings about courses, and patterns of work. Two main implications from this study are: (1) different approaches to curriculum, teaching, and evaluation do make a substantial difference to the daily academic experiences of students, and (2) the relative wealth and quality of the plant, the number of advanced degrees held by the faculty, and administrative and faculty salaries do not significantly affect the mental activities carried on in or out of class, the roles and the behaviors of teachers, the reasons for study, the frequency of challenge, confidence, and interest, and the amount of time and effort invested in study. (JC)

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The Academic Experience

During the spring semester of 1967 the Experience of College Questionnaire was administered on each Project College campus to samples of students randomly selected so that they reflected the proportions of men and women at each grade level. The Questionnaire covered several general areas--extracurricular activities, relationships with peers, student-faculty relationships, academics. An earlier report from Robert Mattuck already has shared some of the findings concerning student-faculty relationships. This report concentrates on the academic area; extracurricular activities and peer relationships will be dealt with later. We aimed for samples of 200 students at each college, but actual numbers finally ranged from 80 to 193.

To obtain data concerning academic experiences and behaviors we split the week into five time intervals, randomly assigned the intervals, and asked each student to respond with reference to the academic contexts--courses, independent studies, tutorials, honors programs, seminars or whatever--that came after the time stipulated for him. Thus we sought to obtain data representative of the total range of academic experiences offered by each college without overrepresentation of any particular element. Data from four different institutions--Classic, Elder, Kildew, and Savior--reflect some of the diversity of student responses, and provide a background against which to consider the other Project Colleges. To economize in preparing these individual reports, the findings for each institution have been superimposed on figures for these four colleges, and comments concerning those findings appear as typed inserts in the mimeographed text. The report deals with five general topics: mental activities in class and in studying for class, the role of the teacher, reasons for studying, feelings about courses, and patterns of work.

As Figure 1 shows, mental activities in class are systematically interrelated. When Listening and Taking Notes occupies a large percentage of class time, Making Statements to the Class--participating in discussions, presenting reports, making speeches--occupies little time. Most importantly, "Doing your own thinking about the ideas presented" occurs less. At Elder and Savior, 60%-70% of the students spend more than half their time listening and more than 70% spend little time making statements. In these classes, 35% indicate they spend little time doing their own thinking, and only 20% spend more than half the time thinking about the ideas being presented. At Kildew and Classic time is more evenly distributed for Listening and taking Notes and Making Statements to the Class, and thinking about the ideas occurs more frequently. But it's worth noting that still only about 40% of the students spend more than half their time, so if thinking about the ideas presented in class is important there is still room for substantial improvement.

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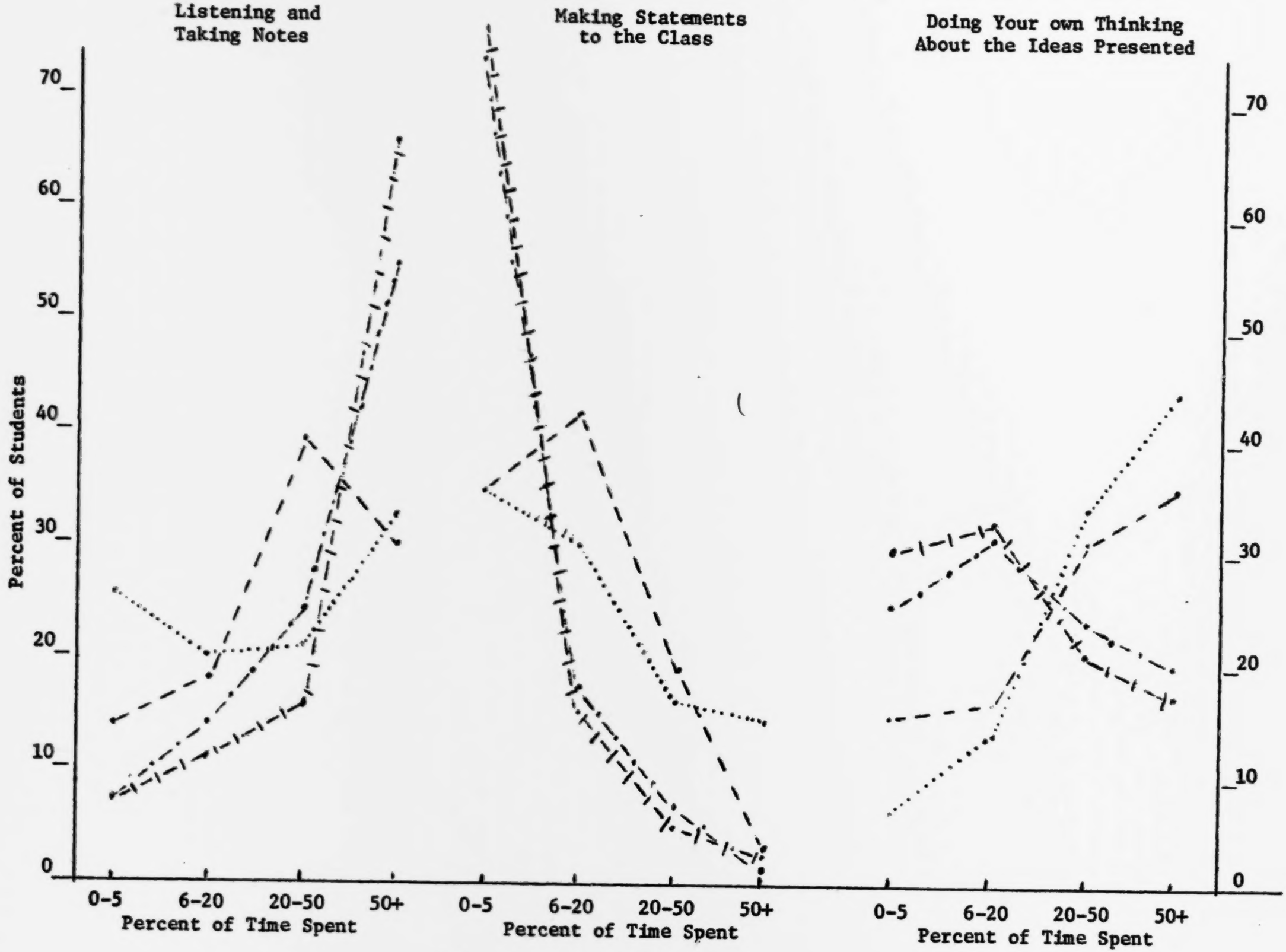
Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the AERA (Los Angeles, February 5-8, 1969).

Figure 1
Mental Activities in Class



Not surprisingly, the mental activities studying for courses vary in ways consistent with the mental activities in class (See Figure 2). At the two colleges where Listening and Taking Notes predominated, Memorizing predominates in class preparation, and synthesizing ideas or information, applying concepts or principles to new problems, and interpreting--translating, mentally re-organizing, or making inferences--all seldom occur. At the two colleges where listening, talking, and thinking are more evenly balanced, Memorizing occurs less frequently, and the other mental activities occur much more frequently.

How do teacher roles and teacher behaviors vary for these different colleges? As Figure 3 indicates, at Elder and Savior where listening and memorizing predominated the teacher most frequently was one who "Dispenses knowledge which it is the students' job to master" or "Directs his efforts flexibly in order to help students learn." He does not often work with students as they both pursue increased understanding or serve as a resource while students carry out their own plans. Consistent with this pattern, his lectures more often follow the text closely and open arguments between student and instructor and between student and student occur much less often. At Kildew it is seldom the student's job to master knowledge dispensed by the teacher. Most often the teacher is learning with the student or serving as a resource to students carrying out their own plans. Classic has its own pattern where instructor roles are more evenly distributed across three major categories: dispensing knowledge, flexible management of own efforts to foster student learning, and shared learning with students. The patterns for Classic and Kildew again become similar for lecturing and open arguing.

Motivation for study can be intrinsic or extrinsic, it can grow out of the interests and concerns of the students, or it can be in the service of more external standards and expectations. The items toward the left in Figure 4--"Interest and enjoyment," "Questions I feel concerned about," "Broaden by general knowledge," "To have a sense of mastering the material"--in decreasing degrees, tend to come from "inside" the students. The assumption made for intrinsic motivation is that study would be pursued whether outside pressures are at work or not. Moving toward the right--"Vocationally useful," "To avoid doing badly,""To get a good grade," and "To complete another requirement for

Figure 2
Mental Activities Studying for Courses

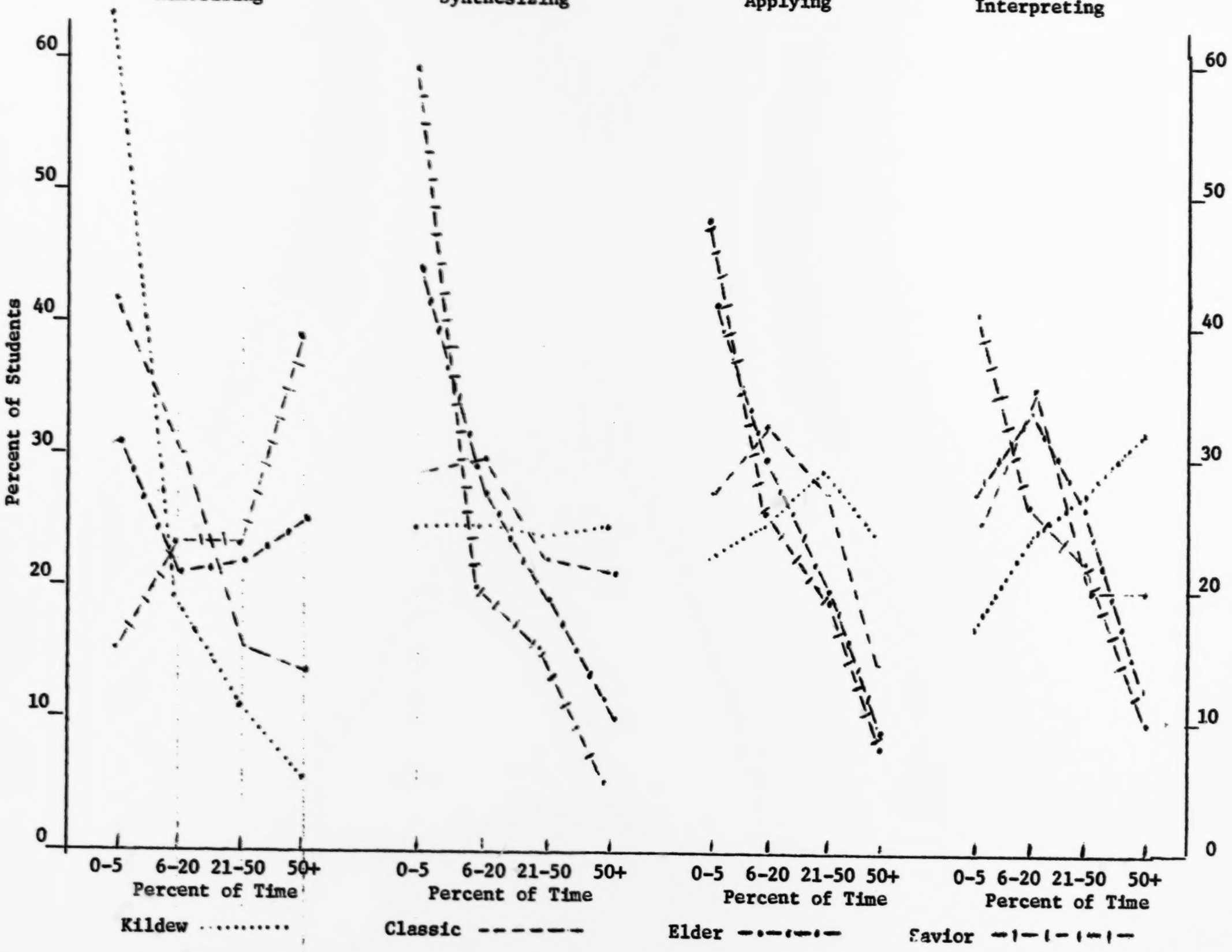


Figure 3
Role of the Teacher

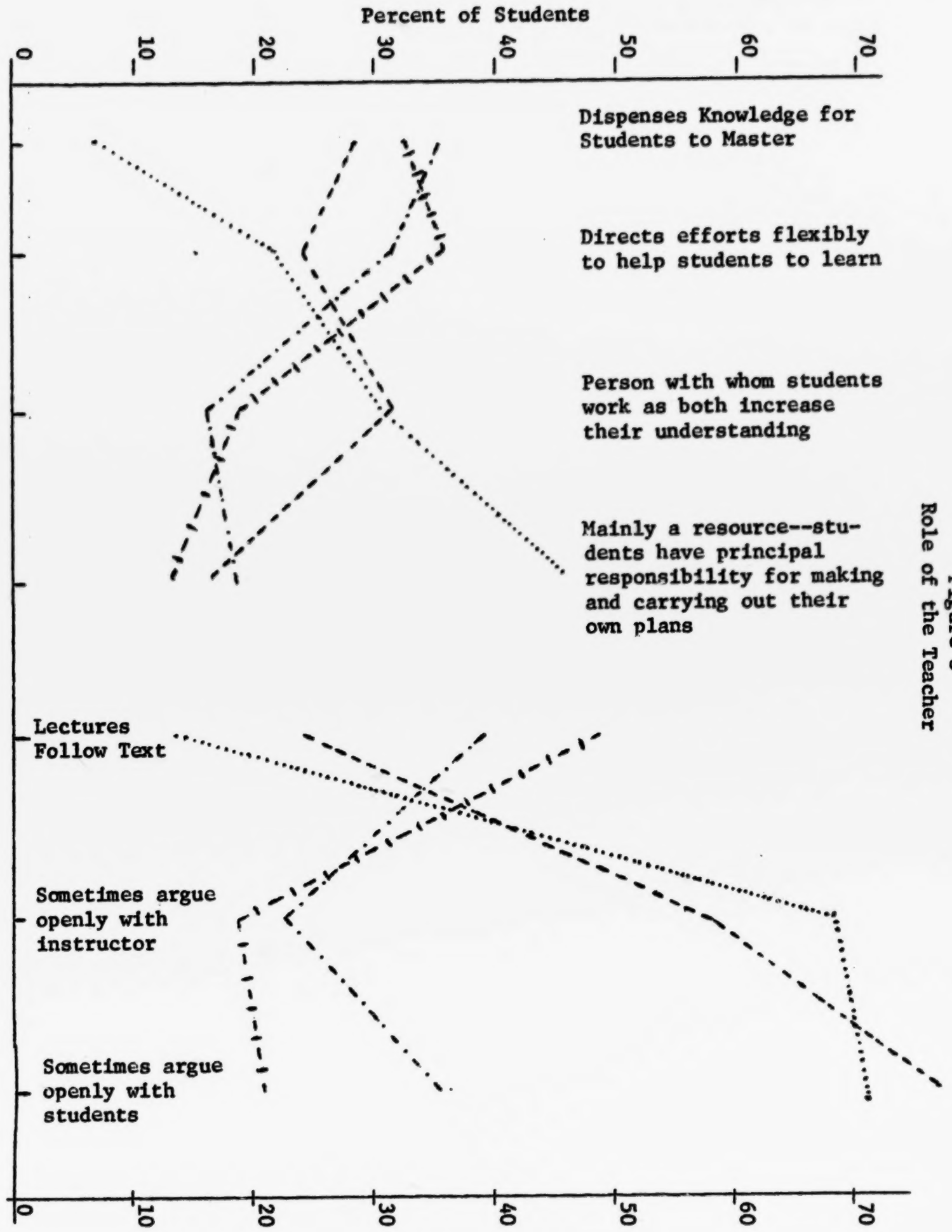
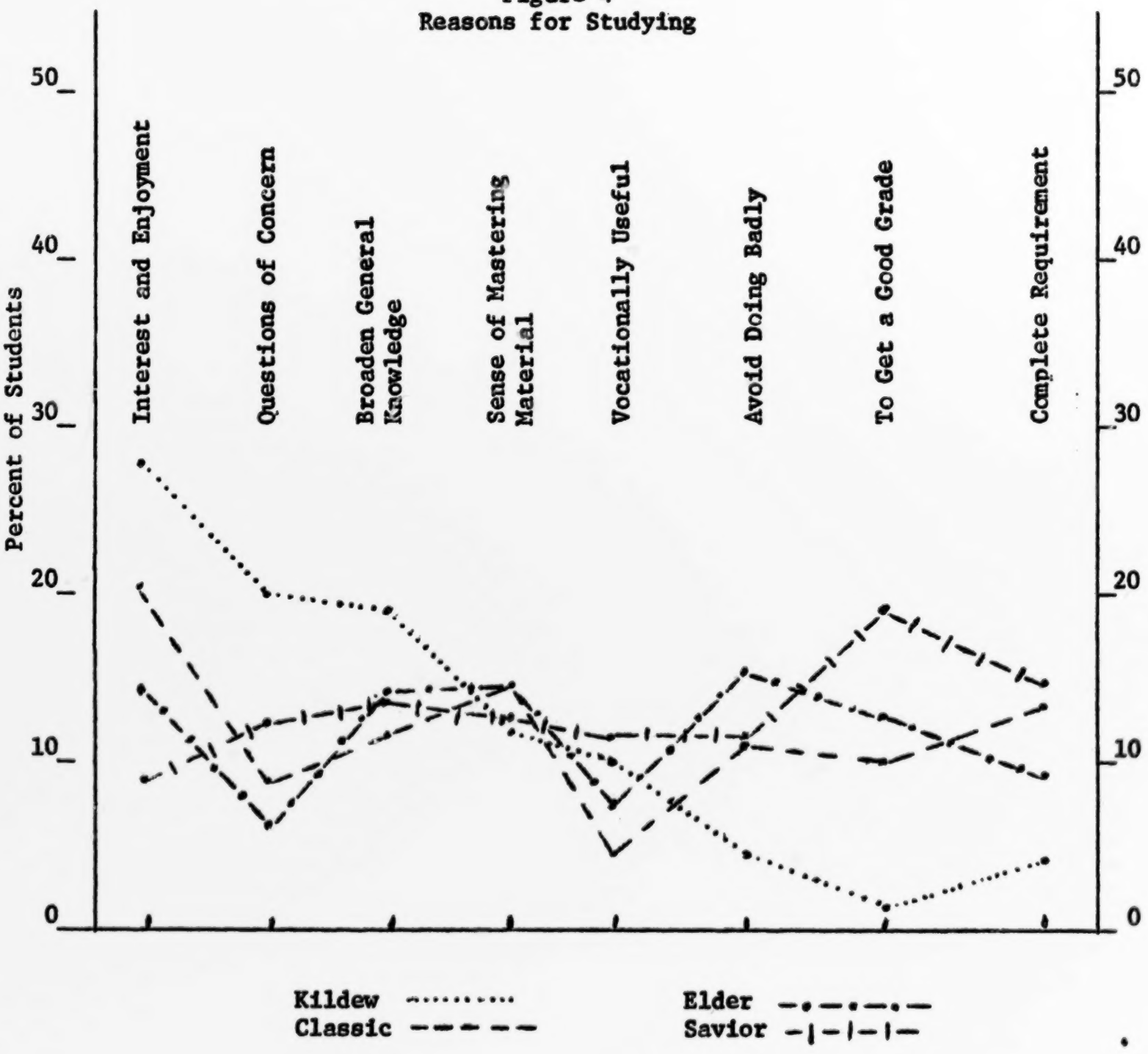


Figure 4
Reasons for Studying



graduation" are increasingly in the service of outside demands or expectations. The assumption is made that if those outside forces were not at work, study would not be pursued. At Savior To Get a Good Grade and To Complete a Requirement outscore the rest, and the most intrinsic alternatives are mentioned least frequently. At Elder the frequencies are more evenly distributed across the alternatives. At Classic, Interest and Enjoyment, and Questions of Concern score highest, but extrinsic reasons are still quite frequently mentioned. At Kildew frequencies are highest for the most intrinsic reasons for study, and extrinsic reasons are mentioned infrequently.

Given these variations in activities in class and out, in teacher role and behavior, in motivation, what proportions of students feel challenged by their courses, confident about them, interested in them? At Kildew students consistently indicate fairly frequent feelings of challenge, of confidence, effectiveness and competence, and feel interested, eager, and attracted. Classic presents a somewhat contrasting picture--almost two thirds of the students feel challenged only rarely or occasionally, and while the balance slightly favors confidence and interest, such feelings occur less frequently. At Elder, half the students feel challenged often and half do not, and feelings of confidence and interest are also about equally balanced. Though Savior students more frequently feel challenged, the balance for Confidence and Interest is about the same as for Elder. The general level of all these figures is worth noting. When not more than two thirds of our students often feel challenged, or confident, effective, and competent, our curricular patterns, our evaluational procedures, and our teaching practices need attention. And given the diversity of students and diversity of approaches which characterize these four quite different institutions, it is clear that no college has the answers to academic effectiveness for all, or even most of its students.

What are the consequences of these institutional differences for how hard students work? Apparently none. As Figure 6 indicates, for the first time, all four institutions closely conform to a single pattern. Classic is only a slight exception, with more students coasting or working sporadically and fewer working intensely. There is somewhat more diversity when it comes to course assignments, where Kildew students are more freqeuntly up-to-date and

Figure 5
How I Felt About Courses

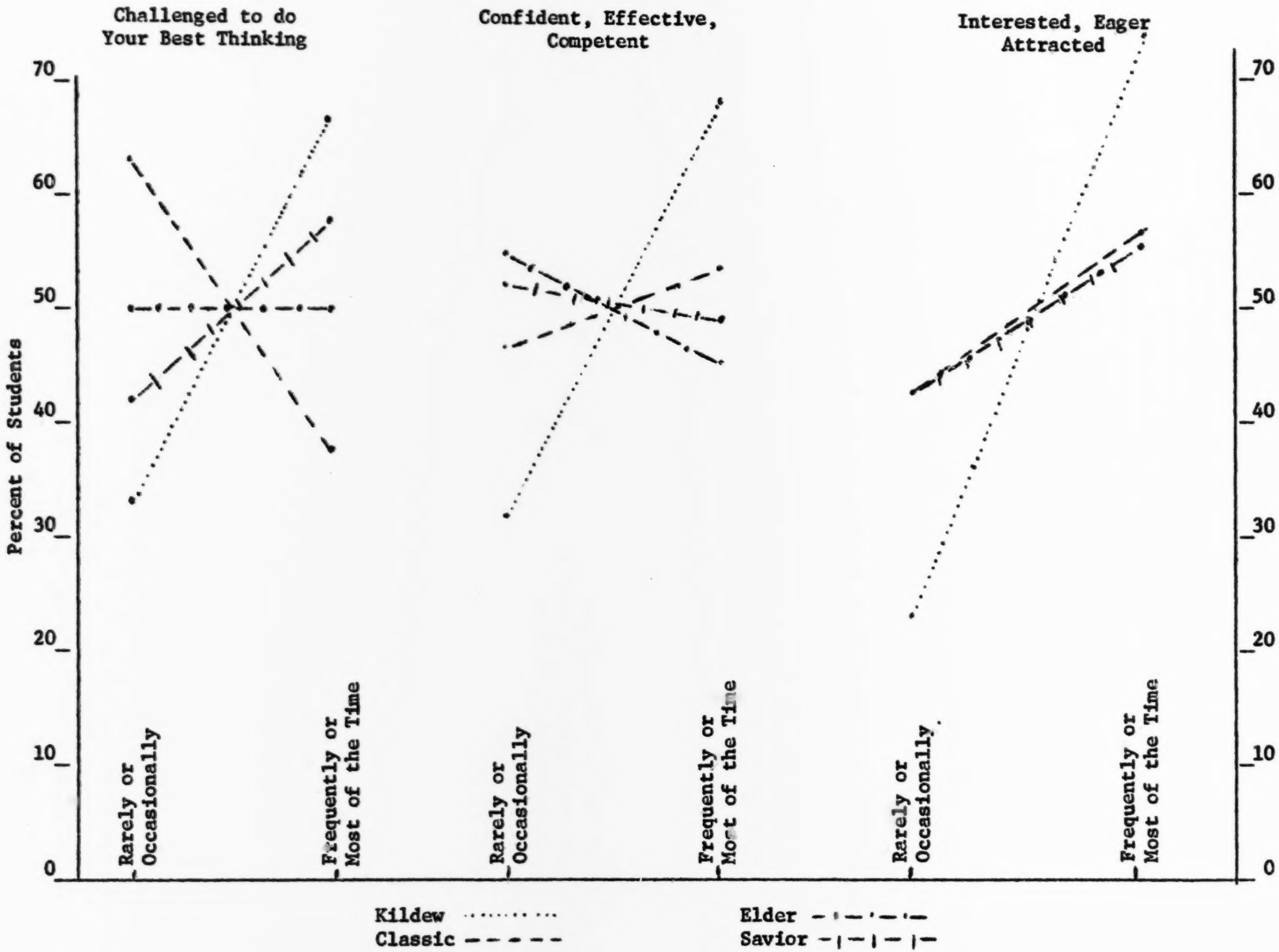
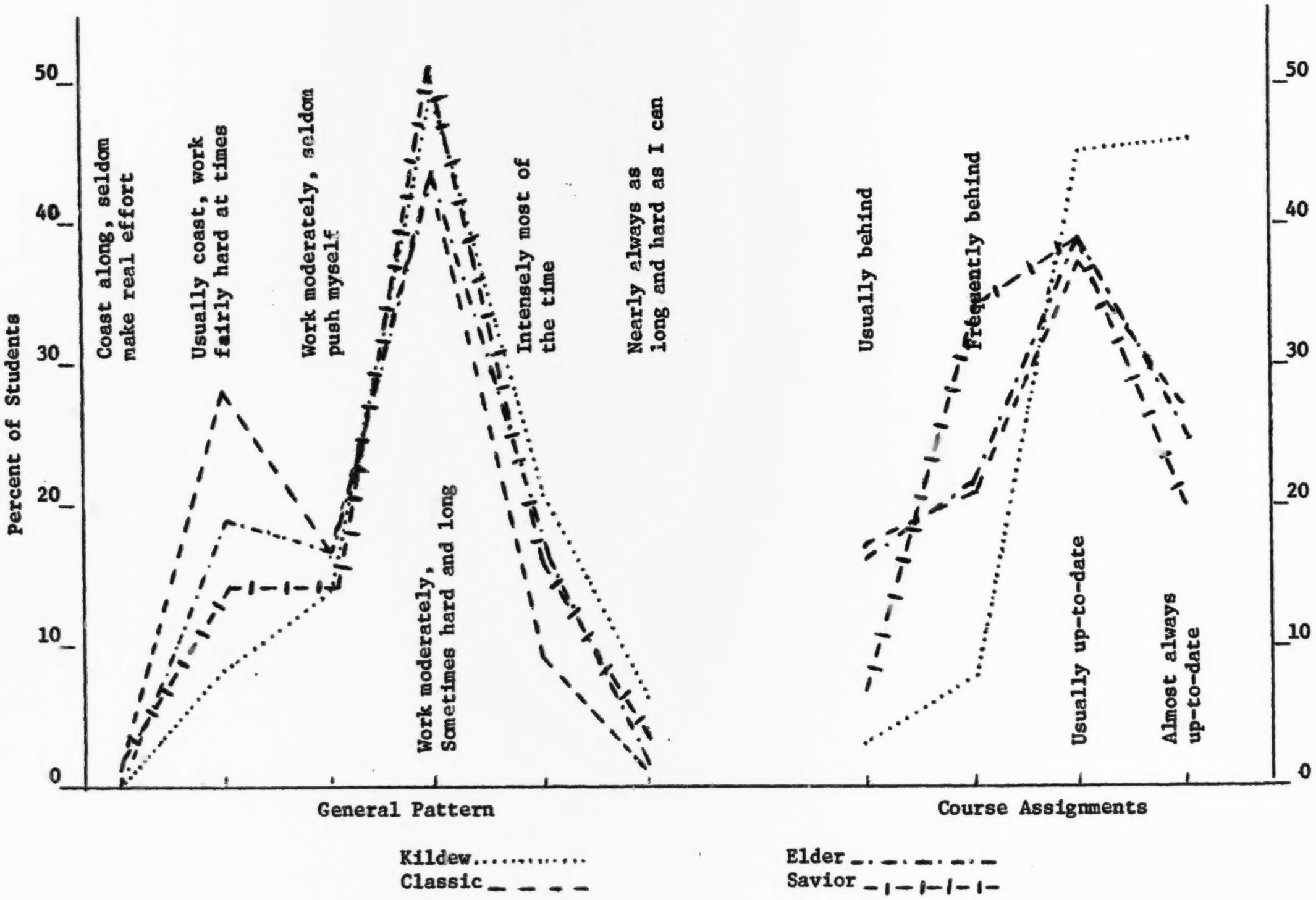


Figure 6
Pattern of Work

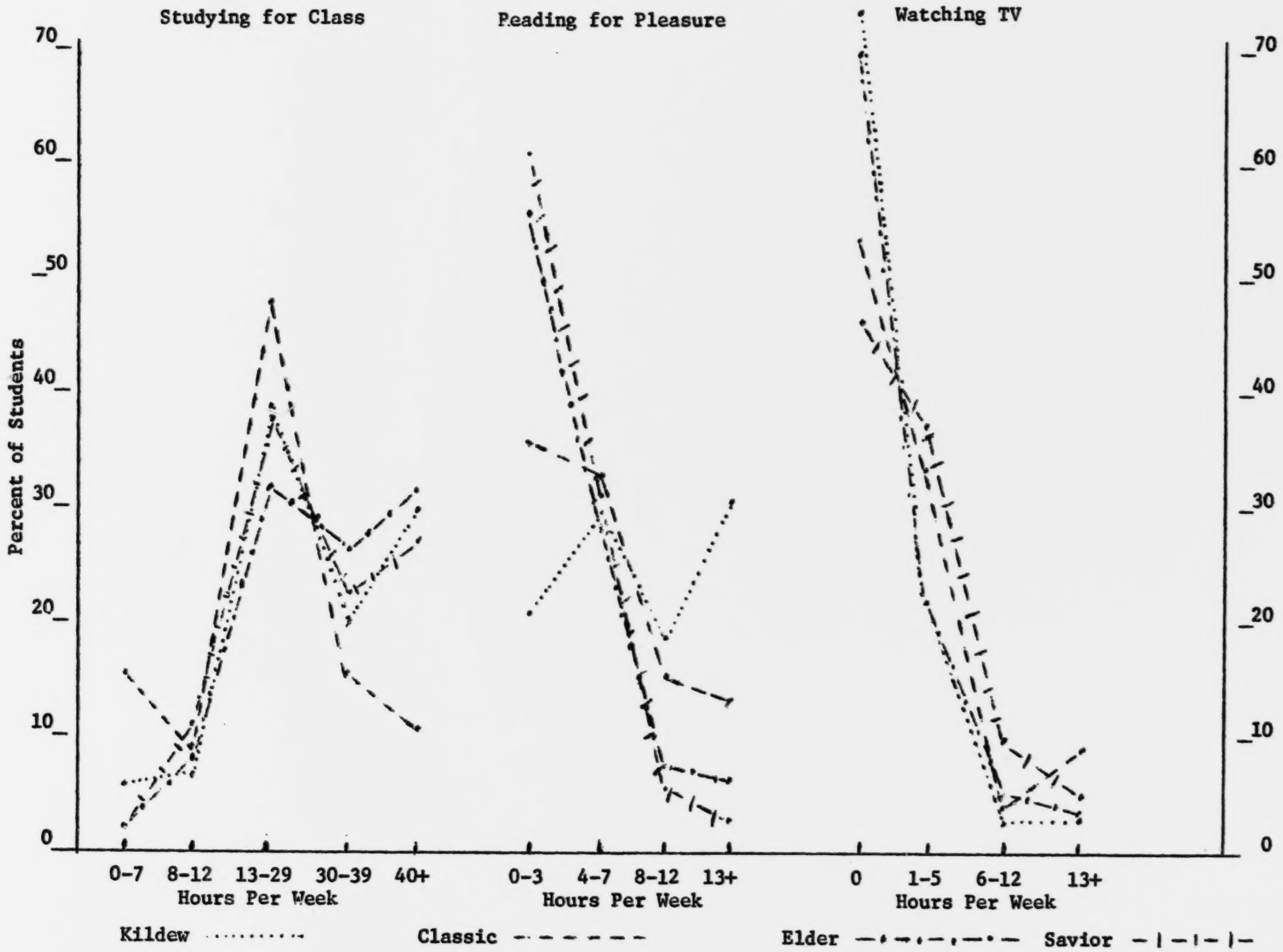


Savior students more frequently behind. The congruence between the hours spent studying for class, as shown in Figure 7, and the general pattern of work reinforces the notion that most students at these four diverse colleges work at about the same pace. At the extremes, Classic students deviate from the others in the hours spent studying as they did on the general pattern, with fewer spending more than forty hours per week, and about four times as many students spending zero to seven hours per week. The relationships between the hours spent Reading for Pleasure and Watching TV vary in the different colleges. Kildew students spend substantially more time reading for pleasure and less time watching TV than any of the others. Classic students spend more time reading than they do watching TV, Savior students spend more time at TV than at Reading for Pleasure, and Elder students spend little time at either. It would be interesting to look at these data by grade level and see whether these time patterns shift with increasing college experience.

In conclusion it might be of interest to indicate some of the general differences among Classic, Kildew, Elder and Savior, as described by teams who visited each campus. Elder and Savior are both actively reappraising their purposes, programs, and constituencies. And some substantial changes are underway. But both are still basically traditional liberal arts colleges, as they were two years ago when these data were collected. The main difference between them is that one is relatively wealthy, both in terms of the diversity and quality of its buildings and facilities, and in terms of its income. It is relatively prestigious, and is more selective in admissions; it has a higher proportion of faculty members with advanced degrees and pays them a good bit more money. The other is less well known, less well off, less selective, and in general operates with more limited resources. It is interesting that these two colleges differ very little in several kinds of academic experience presumed relevant to student development. Classic has a highly structured curriculum with a strong emphasis on intellectual competence. A system of comprehensive examinations explicitly designed to test the ability to synthesize and to apply, is used in addition to tests for information. Teachers and students often concentrate on close examination of short and diverse reading materials selected by committees of teachers and prepared specially for particular courses and classes. Kildew is experimental and progressive. There are no required courses and independent study may be pursued by all students after the first year. Systematic attempts are made to make use of off-campus experiences and resources. The usual system of grades and examinations is replaced by self-evaluations, instructor comments, and end of semester conferences between students and instructors.

Figure 7

Average Number of Hours Invested Per Week



There seem to me to be two major implications in all these data, aside from the particulars that would be of concern to each of the four institutions discussed. First, it seems very clear that different approaches to curriculum, teaching, and evaluation, do make a substantial difference to the daily academic experiences of students, and presumably, therefore, lead to quite different outcomes for intellectual competence, intellectual interests, and other dimensions of student development. The second general implication seems to be that the particular facilities, the relative wealth and quality of the plant, the number of advanced degrees held by the faculty, and--administrative and faculty salaries, do not significantly affect the mental activities carried on in or out of class, the roles and behaviors of teachers, the reasons for study and the frequency of challenge, confidence, and interest, and the amount of time and effort invested in study. Thus, if the academic experiences of students are to be improved, it seems clear that energy should be addressed, not to plant development, buildings, and facilities, but to teachers and students, and to the expectations and conceptual frameworks which influence the way they work together.